

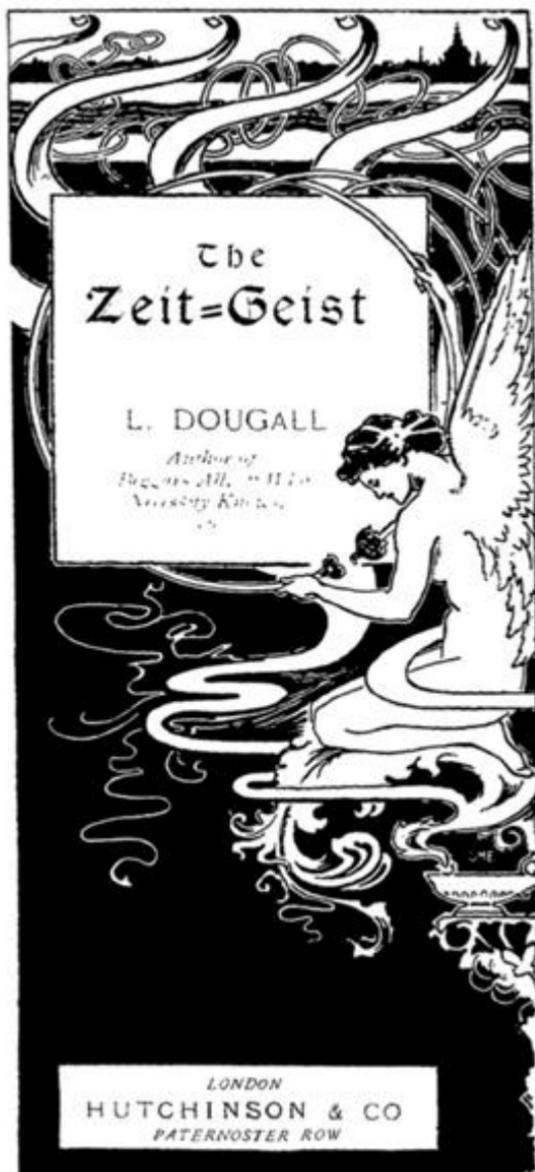
The Zeit-Geist



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The

Zeit-Geist

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"I . . . create evil. I am the Lord."

Isa. xlv. 6, 7.

"Where will God be absent? In His face

Is light, but in His shadow there is healing too:

Let Guido touch the shadow and be healed!"

The Ring and the Book.

"If Nature is the garment of God, it is woven without seam
throughout."

The Ascent of Man.

Oxford, January 1895.

When travelling in Canada, in the region north of Lake Ontario, I came upon traces of the somewhat remarkable life which is the subject of the following sketch.

Having applied to the school-master in the town where Bartholomew Toyner lived, I received an account the graphic detail and imaginative insight of which attest the writer's personal affection. This account, with only such condensation as is necessary, I now give to the world. I do not believe that it belongs to the novel to teach theology; but I do believe that religious sentiments and opinions are a legitimate subject of its art, and that perhaps its highest function is to promote understanding by bringing into contact minds that habitually misinterpret one another.

[Pg 1]

THE ZEIT-GEIST.

CHAPTER I.

PROLOGUE.

To-day I am at home in the little town of the fens, where the Ahwewee River falls some thirty feet from one level of land to another. Both broad levels were covered with forest of ash and maple, spruce and tamarack; but long ago, some time in the thirties, impious hands built dams on the impetuous Ahwewee, and wide marshes and drowned wood-lands are the result. Yet just immediately at Fentown there is neither marsh nor dead tree; the river dashes over its ledge of rock in a foaming flood, runs shallow and rapid be [Pg 2] tween green woods, and all about the town there are breezy pastures where the stumps are still standing, and arable lands well cleared. The little town itself has a thriving look. Its public buildings and its villas have risen, as by the sweep of an enchanter's wand, in these backwoods to the south of the Ottawa valley.

There was a day when I came a stranger to Fentown. The occasion of my coming was a meeting concerning the opening of new schools for the town—schools on a large and ambitious plan for so small a place. When the meeting was over, I came out into the street on a mild September afternoon. The other members of the School Council were with me. There were two clergymen of the party. One of them, a young man with thin, eager face, happened to be at my side.

"This Mr. Toyner, whose opinion has been so much con [Pg 3] sulted, was not here to-day?" I said this interrogatively.

"No, ah—but you'll see him now. He has invited you all to a garden party, or something of that sort. He's in delicate health. Ah—of course, you know, it is natural for me to wish his influence with the Council were much less than it is."

"Indeed! He was spoken of as a philanthropist."

"It's a very poor love to one's fellow-man that gives him all that his vanity desires in the way of knowledge without leading him

into the Church, where he would be taught to set the value of everything in its right proportion."

I was rather struck with this view of the function of the Church. "Certainly," I replied, "to see all things in right proportion is wisdom; but I heard this Toyner mentioned as a religious man."

"He has some imaginations [Pg 4] of his own, I believe, which he mistakes for religion. I do not know him intimately; I do not wish to. I believe he has some sort of desire to do what is right; but that, you know, is a house built upon the sand, unless it is founded upon the desire for instruction as to what *is* right. Every one cries up his generosity; for instance, one of my church-wardens tells him that we need a new organ in the church and the people won't give a penny-piece towards it, so Toyner says, with his benevolent smile, 'They must be taught to give. Tell them I will give half if they will give the other half.' But if the Roman Catholic priest or a Methodist goes to him the next day for a subscription, he gives just as willingly if, as is likely, he thinks the object good. What can you do with a man like that, who has no principle? It's impossible to have much respect for him." [Pg 5]

Now I myself am a school-master, versed in the lore of certain books ancient and modern, but knowing very little about such a practical matter as applied theology; nor did I know very much then concerning the classification of Christians among themselves: but I think that I am not wrong in saying that this young man belonged to that movement in the Anglican Church which fights strongly for a visible unity and for Church tradition. I am so made that I always tend to agree with the man who is speaking, so my companion was encouraged by my sympathy.

He went on: "I can do with a man that is out-and-out anything. I can work with a Papist; I can work with a Methodist, as far as I can conscientiously meet him on common ground, and I can respect him if he conscientiously holds that he is right and I am [Pg 6] wrong: but these fellows that are neither one thing nor the other—they are as dangerous as rocks and shoals that are just hidden under the water. You never know when you have them."

We were upon the broad wooden side-walk of an avenue leading from the central street of the town to a region of outstanding gar-

dens and pleasure-grounds, in which the wooden villas of the citizens stood among luxuriant trees. It is a characteristic of Fentown that the old trees about the place have been left standing.

A new companion came to my side, and he, as fate would have it, was another clergyman. He was an older man, with a genial, bearded face. I think he belonged to that party which takes its name from the Evangel of whose purity it professes itself the guardian.

"You are going to this [Pg 7] entertainment which Mr. and Mrs. Toyner are giving?" The cordiality of his common-place remark had a certain restraint in it.

"You are going also?"

"No; it is not a house at which I visit. I have lived here for twenty-five years, and of course I have known Mr. Toyner more or less all that time. I do not know how I shall be able to work on the same Council with him; but we shall see. We, who believe in the truth of religion, must hold our own if we can."

I was to be the master of the new schools. I pleased him with my assent.

"I am rather sorry," he continued, "to tell the truth, that you should begin your social life in Fentown by visiting Mr. Toyner; but of course this afternoon it is merely a public reception, and after a time you will be able to judge for yourself. I do not [Pg 8] hesitate to say that I consider his influence, especially with the young people, of a most dangerous kind. For a long time, you know, he and his wife were quite ostracised — not so much because of their low origin as because of their religious opinions. But of late years even good Christians appear disposed to be friendly with them. Money, you know — money carries all things before it."

"Yes, that is too often the case."

"Well, I don't say that Toyner doesn't hold up a certain standard of morality among the young men of the place, but it's a pretty low one; and he has them all under his influence. There isn't a young fellow that walks these streets, whether the son of clergyman or beggar, who is not free to go to that man's house every evening and have the run of his rooms and his books. And Toyner and [Pg 9] his

wife will sit down and play cards with them; or they'll get in a lot of girls, and have a dance, or theatricals,—the thin end of the wedge, you know, the thin end of the wedge! And all the young men go to his house, except a few that we've got in our Christian Association."

The speaker was stricter in his views than I saw cause to be; but then, I knew something of his life; he was giving it day by day to save the men of whom he was talking. He had a better right than I to know what was best for them.

"When you have a thorough-going man of the world," he said, "every one knows what that means, and there's not so much harm done. But this Mr. Toyner is always talking about God, and using his influence to make people pray to God. Such men are not ready to pray until they are prepared to give up the world! [Pg 10] The God that he tells them of is a fiction of his imagination; indeed, I might say a mere creature of his fancy, who is going to save all men in the end, whatever they do!"

"A Universalist!"

"Oh, worse than that—at least, I have read the books of Universalists who, though their error was great, did not appear to me so far astray. I cannot understand it! I cannot understand it!" he went on; "I cannot understand the influence that he has obtained over our more educated class; for twenty years ago he was himself a low, besotted drunkard, and his wife is the daughter of a murderer! Still less do I understand how such people can claim to be religious at all, and yet not see to what awful evil the small beginnings of vice must lead. I tell you, if a man is allowed by Providence to lead an easy life, and remains unfaithful, he may still have some good metal [Pg 11] in him which adversity might refine; but when people have gone through all that Toyner and his wife have been through—not a child that has been born to them but has died at the breast—I say, when they have been through all that, and still lead a worldly, unsatisfactory life, you may be sure that there is nothing in them that has the true ring of manhood or womanhood."

I was left alone to enter Mr. Toyner's gates. I found myself in a large pleasure-ground, where Nature had been guided, not curtailed, in her work. I was walking upon a winding drive, walled on either side by a wild irregular line of shrubs, where the delicate

forms of acacias and crab-apples lifted themselves high in comparison to the lower lilac and elderberry-bushes. I watched the sunlit acacias as they fluttered, spreading their delicate leaves and golden pods against the blue [Pg 12] above me. I made my way leisurely in the direction of music which I heard at some distance. I had not advanced far before another person came into my path.

He was a slight, delicate man of middle size. His hair and moustache were almost quite white. Something in the air of neatness and perfection about his dress, in the extreme gravity and clearness of his grey eyes, even in the fine texture of that long, thin, drooping moustache, made it evident to me that this new companion was not what we call an ordinary person.

"Your friend did not come in with you." The voice spoke disappointment; the speaker looked wistfully at the form of the retreating clergyman which he could just see through a gap in the shrubs.

"You wished him to come?"

"I saw you coming. I came toward the gate in the [Pg 13] hope that he might come in." Then he added a word of cordial greeting. I perceived that I was walking with my host.

There are some men to whom one instinctively pays the compliment of direct speech. "I have been walking with two clergymen. I understand that you differ from both with regard to religious opinion."

It appeared to me that after this speech of mine he took my measure quietly. He did not say in so many words he did not see that this difference of opinion was a sufficient reason for their absence, but by some word or sign he gave me to understand that, adding:

"I feel myself deprived of a great benefit in being without their society. They are the two best and noblest men I know."

"It is rare for men to take pleasure in the society of their opponents." [Pg 14]

"Yet you will admit that to be willing to learn from those from whom we differ is the only path to wisdom."

"It is difficult to tread that path without letting go what we already have, and that produces chaos."

With intensity both of thought and feeling he took up the words that I had dropped half idly, and showed me what he thought to be the truth and untruth of them. There was a grave earnestness in his speech which made his opinion on this subject suddenly become of moment to me, and his intensity did not produce any of that sensation of irritation or opposition which the intensity of most men produces as soon as it is felt.

"You think that the chief obstacle which is hindering the progress of true religion in the world at present is that while we will not learn from those who disagree with us [Pg 15] we can obtain no new light, and that when we are willing to reach after their light we become also willing to let go what we have had, so that the world does not gain but loses by the transaction. This is, I admit, an obstacle to thought; but it is not the essential difficulty of our age."

"Let us consider," I said, in my pedantic way, "how my difficulty may be overcome, and then let us discuss that one you consider to be essential."

Toyner's choice of words, like his appearance, betrayed a strong, yet finely chiselled personality.

"We are truly accustomed now to the idea that whatever has life cannot possibly remain unchanged, but must always develop by leaving some part behind and producing some part that is new. It is God's will that the religious thought of the world, which is made up of [Pg 16] the thought of individuals, shall proceed in this way, whether we will or not, but it must always help progress when we can make our wills at one with God's in this matter; we go faster and safer so. Now to say that to submit willingly to God's law of growth is to produce chaos must certainly be a fallacy. It must then be a fallacy to argue that to keep a mind open to all influences is antagonistic to the truest religious life; we cannot—whether we wish or not, we *cannot*—let go any truth that has been assimilated into our lives; and what truth we have not assimilated it is no advantage to hold without agitation. We know better where we are when we are forced to sift it. It is the very great apparent advantage of recognised order that deceives us! When we lose that *apparent* advantage, when we lose, too, the familiar names and symbols, [Pg 17] and think, like children, that we have lost the reality they have

expressed to us, a very low state of things *appears* to result. The strain and stress of life become much greater. Ah! but, my friend, it is that strain and stress that shape us into the image of God."

"You hinted, I think, that to your mind there was a more real obstacle, one peculiar to our age."

Ever since I first met him I have been puzzled to know how it was that I often knew so nearly what Toyner meant when he only partially expressed his thought; he had this power over my understanding. He was my master from the first.

He laid his hand now slightly upon my arm, as though to emphasise what he said.

"It is a little hard to explain it reverently," he said, "and still harder to understand why the difficulty should have come about, but in our day it would [Pg 18] seem that the nights of prayer and the fresh intuition into the laws of God's working, which we see united in the life of our great Example, have become divorced. It is their union again that we must have—that we shall have; but at present there is the difficulty for every man of us—the men who lead us in either path are different men and lead different ways. Our lawgivers are not the men who meet God upon the mount. Our scientists are not the teachers who are pre-eminent for fasting and prayer. We who to be true to ourselves must follow in both paths find our souls perplexed."

In front of us, as we turned a curve in the drive, a bed of scarlet lilies stood stately in the sun, and a pair of bickering sparrows rose from the fountain near which they grew. Toyner made a slight gesture of his hand. With the eagerness of a child he asked: [Pg 19]

"Is it not hard to believe that we may ask and expect forgiveness and gifts from the God who by slow inevitable laws of growth clothes the lilies, who ordains the fall of every one of these sparrows, foresees the fall and ordains it—the God whose character is expressed in physical law? The texts of Jesus have become so trite that we forget that they contain the same vision of 'God's mind in all things' that makes it so hard to believe in a personality in God, that makes prayer seem to us so futile."

We came out of the shrubbery upon a bank that dropped before us to a level lawn. I found myself in the midst of a company of people among whom were the other members of the new School Council. Below, upon the lawn, there was a little spectacle going on for our entertainment—a morris-dance, simply and gracefully performed by young [Pg 20] people dressed in quaintly fashioned frocks of calico; there was good music too—one or two instruments, to which they danced. Round the other side of the grass an avenue of stately Canadian maples shut in the view, except where the river or the pale blue of the eastern horizon was seen in glimpses through their branches. Behind us the sun's declining rays fell upon an old-fashioned garden of holly-hocks and asters, so that the effect, as one caught it turning sideways, was like light upon a stained-glass window, so rich were the dyes. I saw all this only as one sees the surroundings of some object that interests supremely.

The man who had been walking with me said simply, "This is my wife."

Before me stood a woman who had the power that some few women have of making all those whom they gather round them speak out clearly [Pg 21] and freshly the best that is in them.

Ah! we live in a new country. Its streets are not paved with gold, nor is prosperity to be attained without toil; but it gives this one advantage—room for growth; whatever virtue a soul contains may reach its full height and fragrance and colour, if it will.

I did not know then that the beginning of this provincial *salon*, which Toyner's wife had kept about her for so many years, and to which she gave a genuine brilliance, however raw the material, had been a wooden shanty, in which a small income was made by the sale of home-brewed beer.

I always remember Ann Toyner as I saw her that first time. Her eyes were black and still bright; but when I looked at them I remembered the little children that had died in her arms, and I knew [Pg 22] that her hopes had not died with them, but by that suffering had been transformed. As I heard her talk, my own hopes lifted themselves above their ordinary level.